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There is no Time Like the Present

Chronicle Literary Columns

Captain Zeke and Eddie boarded the little launch at two o'clock on the following afternoon.

Mrs. Bradley came down to the beach to see them off, and her farewells were rather tearful.

"Take good care of him," Zeke said to the skipper. "Remember, he's your Sarah's only child."

"Only child!" repeated the Captain, in amazement. "Great land! you ain't hankerin' to have him twins, are you? He'll be all right. Three years of fun, and then some home to find money in the bank wait for him to spend. That and his wage and share'll give him a pretty pocketful. Big luck, I call it. Try, Ed?"

The packet, with a fair wind to help her, moved out from her anchorage. Before the sandy billows of Bayport had sunk below the horizon, Eddie was heartily homesick.

He had a taste of the discipline during his first hour aboard the packet. Captain Zeke had found a crony among the passengers, another old salt, one Cap'n Solomon Badger, of Harris, who also was going to the city to set sail for foreign parts. Eddie, not finding the conversation of the skippers particularly interesting, had wandered forward. This "uncle suddenly became aware of his absence.

"Where's that boy gone to? Hi, Ed! What you doing up there? Come aft, and set down alongside."

Eddie, leaning over the rail, did not stir. "I'm all right," he answered dully. "I like it better here."

"The next minute a fat-tongued, blubbery finger clapped on the rim of his left ear, and he was held just as dozen grinning passengers and a host of hands, back to a seat near the wheel. Into this seat he was plunged without ceremony.

"When I speak to you, son," observed the Captain, "nearly every one wants to do two things right off: one is to say, 'Aye, aye, sir,' and 'other is to mind on the jump. It's your skipper that's bossin' you now, not your Aunt Elvira, and the sooner you apiece that into your memory 'the better for you. I'm shippin' this young fellow, Cap'n Sol," he added, to his friend from Harris, "a cabin-boy, and I want to begin right. His aintie's missin' him a little, but I call late to fix that in a day or so."

"Cap'n Badger nodded. "A good bargain," he said, "I'm shippin' him marked sagely. 'You mind your superior officer, boy, and you've earned the full lesson of a seaman. I've been aboard ships, where an answer same as you gave your uncle would land you in the scupper with your topriggin' busted. Aye, indeed."

"Eddie, very red in the face and with a tingling ear, made no answer; but, like the famous parrot, he thought much."

The two captains were discussing a sailwarden's subject, namely, the status of the process known as "shanghaiing" sailors.

"I don't believe in it myself," affirmed Captain Sol. "It don't seem to me Christian nor moral. And yet there's times when—"

"I agree with you exactly," concurred Captain Zeke. "I never shanghai'd a fust-hand in my life. Me and my first mate, Obed Collins—you know him, Sol? one of the Nantucket Collins—we've had more arguments than a few about it. 'Whain's what?' I give in to that, and men, and hard to get for 'vages that last name as mine do. But I won't shanghai nobody, and I tell Obed so. 'If you want to take the responsibility,' I says to him, 'I won't interfere; but I don't want to know nothin' of the details.' Then my conscience is clear, anyhow."

"And yet," continued his companion, "I s'pose it's just as well for 'em as to be gettin' drunk in crimps' coard'n'houses. All's done, they tell me, is to put a little sleepin' stuff—opium or such—in their grog, and there they be, wake up aboard a clean ship, out of temptation's way, and no chance to drink nor fight. Lookin' at it that way, it seems almost a mercy to 'em don't it? And the sleepin' stuff don't do 'em no harm."

"Harm? Not a mite of it. Why I tell you, Sol, I'm subject to rheumatiz when I get amongst ice or in cold water ashore, and when it's got me good I can't sleep nights. Old Mr. Putroose, down home, he gave me some

opium pills. One of 'em stops pain and I get to sleep soon's I turn in. Got a couple of boxes of them now in my cabin. Well, one time I got sort of absent-minded—been havin' dinner with some feller I knew—and I took two of them pills, by mistake. Sleep! Say I slept fourteen hours on a stretch and they had to stick pins into me to wake me up. But I left fast after it; 'nothing' but a little headache, same as anybody's likely to have after a dinner like—after a dinner. I could take fifty of them pills and not mind it. No, no! drugs may hurt a land-lubber, but sailor's health's too tough.

"What's the matter, boy? Goin' to sleep?"

Eddie looked up. "No—no, sir," he replied. "I was thinkin', that's all."

Captain Zeke, smiling approval of the "sit," said: "That's the way to talk, son. 'That's all.' You'll learn, give you time."

"Yes, sir," said Eddie, "I guess so." His meditations had brought him to a definite conclusion, namely, that he would run away as soon after arriving in Boston as was possible. He would not go on that whaling voyage.

The packet reached the city in the early hours of the morning. First of all, on landing, Captain Zeke arranged for his trunk and his nephew's bag to be sent aboard the Lucky Strike.

The ship was lying at Long Wharf and she was to sail at mid-night evening; "goin' out on the lob," her skipper said. Then satchel in hand, the Captain led the way to town.

"Hain't I better go aboard the ship and wait for you, Uncle Zeke?" asked Eddie, with studied carelessness.

"No, no, son. You come right along with me. Got errands to do, you and my have. Got to buy your fit-out for one thing. You can't go to sea in them shore lugs."

Eddie covered his chagrin with a question. "What 'you takin' that satchel for?" he asked.

"Got papers and one thing or 'other in it. Besides, it's handy to put bundles in."

They walked through lower Corner Clay Street, lined at this period, with ship-chandlers' stores, seamen's lodging-houses, shipping offices, and the like. The city was brand-new to Eddie and he looked about him with wide-eyed interest. Captain Zeke nodded to various acquaintances whom he

who was that?" inquired the nephew, referring to one of these a burly, red-haired man in soiled shirt-sleeves, who was standing in the doorway of a dingy shop, the windows of which were filled with bottles. Various signs hung about, indicated that "Choice Wines and Liquors" were sold within, that "Comfortable Beds" might be had at thirty-five cents a night, that sailors could secure berths in ships from all parts of the world, and that "Passages for the GoldDigging" might be booked at reasonable prices.

"Him?" replied the Captain absently. "Oh, his name's Reilly. Runs a sailors' boarding-house and—Well, what do you want?" This to the red-haired man, who had run after them.

"Why, Captain," said Mr. Reilly, "I just wanted to say that them two fust-hand hands you need ain't turned up yet, but I'll—"

"I don't want to know nothin' about it," was the quick reply. "That's between you and Mr. Collins. I can't stop to talk. I'm busy."

They hurried on. Eddie appeared fascinated by Mr. Reilly and his plate of business, for he kept glancing back at it to fix the locality in his mind. By noon many errands had been done. In a little clothing-store, kept by a former Cape Codder, Captain Zeke bought his nephew a sailor's outfit, including everything needed for a long voyage in an Arctic climate. The purchase consumed much time, for nothing was bought at the price first named, and the "baiting-down" process was lengthy and argumentative. The shopkeeper finally agreed to "throw-in" a black and yellow neckerchief, for good measure, and on this basis the deal was made. At last, the satchel being stuffed to the top and the boy's arms filled with bundles, they entered the door of the "Bay State House," a hotel on Hanover Street. Here also the Captain was known. After an interview with the clerk, they climbed four flights to a room under the eaves.

"There!" exclaimed Captain Zeke, dumping satchel and bundles on the

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(Continued on page 1).

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INDEXED AT THE FOLLOWING RATES:

Strathcona Branch, G. W. MARRIOTT, Manager